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AUTHOR Tuttle, William M., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

An American historian writing about the experiences of American homefront children during the Second World War sought to add authenticity to his book by including in it the personal stories of people who had been children during the war, told in their own words. The writer's letter of appeal, published in about 100 U.S. newspapers and about 75 African-American, Hispanic-American, and Jewish-American publications, received an overwhelming response, and this paper discusses the impact that some 2,000 letters received from people who were children on the homefront during World War II had on the book. Focusing on two topics, the paper first discusses the way in which the letters changed the book by expanding the writer's conception of what was going on in the homefront children's lives. The second topic concerns how the letters illuminated the chronological divisions within the homefront children's cohort itself, revealing significant differences in the development and lives of children born during three time periods: 1932 to 1935, 1936 to 1941, and 1942 to 1945. (DB)

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"America's Children in Wartime: Beyond the 'Latchkey Child'"

by

William M. Tuttle, Jr.
Professor of History
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas 66045

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A few months ago, when Glen Elder called to ask me to serve on this panel, we agreed that I would take a broad look at my topic of America's homefront children. Thus, we agreed on the wide-open title of "America's Children in Wartime: Beyond the 'Latchkey Child.'"

A year and a half ago, I had finished writing a draft of my study of America's homefront children during the Second World War. But what I had written was one-dimensional and boring. What was missing was authenticity. What was missing was the voice of the homefront children themselves. To rectify this, I devised an approach which, I hoped, would give me the first-person, participant testimony which was lacking.

In February and March 1990, I wrote the 100 largest newspapers in the United States (by cicrculation), as well as about 75 African-American, Hispanic-American, and Jewish-American newspapers and magazines. "Dear Editor," I wrote:

"I am a professor of history ... and the book which I am now writing may be of interest to some of your readers.... This book deals with American children's experiences on the homefront during the Second World War.

"The child's perspective seldom appears in history. Yet for many Americans now in their fifties, their childhood experiences during the war were not only of crucial importance then, but have remained influential throughout their lives. Issues such as the soldier father's absence and even death come to my mind.... I want to know about children of all colors, and my book will explore racial, ethnic, and gender differences and relations among children. My book will also deal with children's contributions to the war effort in scrap-collection and bond drives, and with the impact of ... movies, radio, and comic books....

"These are some the topics I will be addressing. But to do the job right, I would like to hear from people ... who have stories to tell about their lives on the homefront...."

With this appeal, the letters began arriving at the rate of 30-40 per day. In all, I have received about 2,000 letters. They deal with an amazing variety of topics ranging from adultery, air raids, and alcoholism to V-J Day, War Bonds, and "war-boom communities," and from anti-Semitism, the atomic bomb, and the Boy Scouts to scrap collection drives, sexuality, and spies. I devised a coding system for the 175 different topics with which these letters deal, and through this system I have been able to access the material which I need.

Since I only have about twenty minutes to talk about the impact of these letters on my project, I would like to focus on two topics. First, the way in which these letters have changed the book I was writing by expanding my conception of what was going on in the homefront children's lives. Second, the way in which these letters have helped me to appreciate the internal chronological divisions within the homefront children's cohort itself.

I would also like to make a disclaimer at this point. While I have received 2,000 letters to date, these letters do not allow me to make quantitative judgments about the homefront children's lives. I know much more than I did about the richness and range of children's individual experiences, but I cannot say specifically how many children shared these experiences, or whether they were typical or not. While I might hint at typicality in some cases, my objective has been to document the range of children's experiences and, using the children's recollections, to try to understand the meaning of the war years in their lives. Thus, my goal has not been--and indeed could not be--cliometrics, but rather "thick description," in the words of Clifford Geertz.

First, how have the letters helped to illuminate what was going on in the homefront children's lives?

The first chapter, which I have entitled "The Homefront Children's First Fears: Pearl Harbor, Air Raid Drills, and Nightmares," begins with children's flashbulb memories of hearing the news of Pearl Harbor, and then describes the fears and anxieties generated by blackouts and air raid drills and by their parents' behavior. From this chapter, I think, one can begin to understand the centrality of people's memory to the book which I have written.

In the next chapter, entitled "The Depression Children and the War Babies: A Cohort Split in Two," I discuss not only the facts concerning the wartime marriage and baby booms--after the marriage and baby busts of the 1930s--but also two conceptual themes: First, the idea that while the homefront children constitute a cohort--that is, the children born between the early 1930s and 1945 were preadolescents during the war--this cohort breaks down into two subcohorts, splitting in about 1941-1942 with the beginning of the marriage and baby booms. Second, the thesis that developmental age is a significant, but overlooked, historical variable. In short, it is important not only what happens in a child's life, but when in the child's life--that is, at what age--the event occurs. Thus, the war's effects, for example, father separation and absence, varied depending upon the age of the child at the time.

The issue of father absence is obviously crucial to my

study, and I deal with it in two separate chapters, the first of which describes the departure and absence of fathers, as well as of older brothers and other significant males. This chapter also discusses gender and the differential impact of father absence on girls and boys. For insights into gender differences, I have relied on studies of object relations, such as those by Nancy Chodorow, as well as on Beatrice and John Whiting's studies of "cross-sex identity and on lifespan studies of the war's father-absent boys, done in the 1960s by Lyn Carlsmith and Eleanor Maccoby. And this chapter explores the fears of the children as well as those of their parents and grandparents; the importance of letter-writing in keeping children's memories alive; and the tragic need of some of the homefront children to deal with death.

Another chapter focuses on the homefront families that migrated during the war and with the children who either became "camp followers," relocating from one army post or navy base as they followed the fathers around the country, or who settled with their families in such war-boom communities as Willow Run, Michigan, San Diego, or Pascagoula, Mississippi.

A related chapter discusses "America's Maligned Working Mothers and Their Latchkey Children: The Other Side of the Story." Elaine May and others here have heard a version of this chapter, which I think is an important corrective to the endless debate about childhood neglect and suffering during the war, much

of which directly blames the working mother. Moreover, I believe that the models established during the war by the federal government, municipal school systems, industry, and by the mothers themselves are worthy of emulation as we face enormous child-care challenges today. I have in mind, particularly, "Extended School Services," in which the public schools opened early--say at 6 p.m.--and stayed open until dinnertime or later--and in a few of which the working mother could pick up not only her child or children, but also precooked meals for the family, to be heated up when they got home.

Although much of the homefront children's history deals with social change, some of its most important aspects concern tradition, reinforced by regional, cultural, and class differences. I call the next chapter "America's Preschool Children and the Persistence of Diversity in Child Rearing: Region, Culture, and Class." This chapter builds on three social scientific traditions: community studies done by sociologists and anthropologists from the 1930s to the 1950s; studies in psychological anthropology, namely, the "culture and personality studies" done in the 1940s and 1950s; and psychological studies, based on social learning theory models, done at the same time on modes of parenting.

The homefront children's letters proved indispensable in writing the chapter entitled "America's School-Age Children

Fight the War: Political Socialization, Patriotism, and Participation," which focuses on school-age children and the advent of political socialization in their lives; on the political culture transmitted in the grade schools; on children's participation in the war effort; and on their intense patriotism. This chapter relies on cognitive psychology as a framework for understanding the impact of the war on school-age children.

I had not even conceived of the next chapter until the homefront children's letters began to arrive. I call it "The Homefront Children Play War Games: Boys, Girls, and Sex-Typing." The next chapter is related, for it also deals with gender roles, in assessing the homefront children's popular culture as expressed in radio, movies, and comic books.

Likewise, the letters were indispensable to understanding what I have called "The Fractured Homefront," which focuses on the hostility confronted by Japanese-American, German-American, Italian-American, Jewish-American, African-American, Hispanic American, and Native American children, as well as by the children of pacifists and Jehovah's Witnesses. There is literature on adult conflict on the homefront during the war; but there is very little on children's homefront conflicts based on race, ethnicity, and cultural differences. These letters should help to fill that void.

On the other hand, for some chapters, I was able to find sufficient evidence in the National Archives as well as in numerous periodical articles published during the war. An example is the chapter entitled "The Battle for the Homefront Children's Health and Welfare: Victories and Defeats," in which I tried to document the significance of governmental efforts to improve health through EMIC, Emergency Maternal and Infant Care. The homefront children's letters do become significant when they address what was, for many, the scariest problem on the homefront: polio.

Half of the issue of father absence is separation; the other half is the problem of father return. In the next chapter, entitled "The War Is Over, 'Daddy's Coming Home!': The Homefront Children Face War's Enormity," I first discuss the homefront children's reactions to the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, and then follow up on my earlier discussion of gender differences and the issue of identity caused by father absence. Here, too, the letters were indispensable, for they make graphic an issue that historians of the war have largely overlooked: Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which afflicted many of the returning fathers. This chapter also explores the lifespan consequences of father absence, again paying special attention to the variable of gender.

In the final two chapters, I discuss my contention that both

individual development and social change are the products of configurations the main elements of which are developmental age or stage, family and popular culture, and social history. I also look at America's homefront children at middle age, based on letters detailing the developmental challenges which they are facing in the 1990s, such as the enfeeblement and death of their parents, and the "empty nest" as their children leave the home. As we know, however, this latter item, also for reasons of history--and economics--is now changing and children are remaining at home longer than before.

Although the homefront children comprise one cohort, the standard definition of which is that it is that "aggregate of individuals (within some population definition) who experienced the same event within the same time interval," this conceals the vast differences in outlook that existed between the older members of this cohort--the Depression-marked children born in the 1930s--and the youngest members--the babies born during the war. And to complicate this issue further, the homefront children themselves insist that their cohort should actually be subdivided not in two, but into three subcohorts. Although the factor of subcohorts undermines hypotheses about collective identity, the issue is nevertheless significant to the homefront children's self-identification. The homefront children have

placed themselves in the following three groupings:1

First, there are those born between about 1932 and 1935. While they were still preadolescents during wartime, their early childhood years had been deeply etched by the economics--and psychology--of depression. Moreover, their later childhood years were distinctive too; being on the verge of adolescence during the war, to these children sexuality and military service seemed not so far away. Many of these homefront girls and boys carried serious burdens with them; they worried about the future, especially about making a living. "Boys of the Depression generation," wrote the journalist Russell Baker, who was one of them, "were expected to have their hearts set on moneymaking work.... Boys who hadn't yet decided on a specific career usually replied that their ambition was 'to be a success.' That was all right. The Depression had made materialists of us all...." Glen Elder, in his study of children who were eight and nine years old when the Great Depression began, concluded that "the depression's main legacy took the form of shaping values and attitudes. Men and women who had grown up in depression-marked homes were most likely to anchor their lives around family and children, perhaps reflecting the notion of home as a refuge in an

[1] Norman B. Ryder, "The Cohort As a Concept in the Study of Social Change," American Sociological Review, 30 (December 1965), 845. I wish to thank Professor Sanford Dornbusch of Stanford University who, at a crucial point in my research, first suggested that I should view this cohort in terms of its internal divisions occurring about every four years.

unpredictable world." It was not surprising that numerous parents of the Baby Boom came from the first subcohort.2

This subcohort was culturally conservative. Some studies have looked at the distinctive behavioral characteristics of American women born in the 1930s--who, as the demographer Richard A. Easterlin has noted, were "in their teens or preteens during World War II, and who married and became mothers in the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps most indicative, according to another demographer, they "married at a younger age than any other age group in American history.... Demographers expect 96 percent of the women born in the 1930s will marry compared to the 87 percent of those born in the 1950s." These women gave birth to their first child at a young age--"the last generation of parents to not postpone the birth of the first child by many years"--and they had few children after the mother's thirtieth birthday. "Thirty percent of the wives born in the 1930s had at least two children by their third wedding anniversary compared to only 17 perent of the wives born in the mid and late 1940s.... Only 7 percent of the women born in the 1930s are childless, the lowest proportion of childless women to any generation in American history." Between this generation of women and the next there

[2] Baker, Growing Up (New York: Plume edition, 1983), 190; Elder, Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 283-91; Elder and Richard C. Rockwell, "The Depression Experience in Men's Lives," in Allan J. Lichtman and Joan R. Challinor, editors, Kin and Communities: Families in America (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 97.

appears to be a great divide. Women born in the 1930s, Katherine S. Newman has observed in her study of downward mobility in America, "instantly recognize the values and expectations they hold in common and feel a kinship to their age-mates...." But women born in the 1940s and "marked by the sixties generation," are "products of an entirely different formative experience." When divorce occurred, both groups of women had deal with "shattered expectations for their own lives and those of their children. But the nature of those expectations, and the ways in which they come to grip with their destruction, is a matter of generational culture."[3]

The second subcohort consists of boys and girls born between about 1936 and 1941. This age group functioned as "the bridge" between the Depression children and the war babies. Indeed, this intragroup's self-definition is that it is mediative because it sits astride two generations whose great divide occurs in 1941 and 1942. True, a good many men and women of the second subcohort still consider themselves to be children of the Great Depression. Along with year of birth, social class was another

[3] Richard A. Easterlin, Birth and Fortune: The Impact of Numbers on Personal Welfare (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 54; Lyle E. Schaller, "Were You Born in the 1930s?" The Parish Paper (Yokefellow Institute), 16 (February 1987), unpaginated; Susan Householder Van Horn, Women, Work, and Fertility, 1900-1986 (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 82-123; Hugh Carter and Paul Glick, Marriage and Divorce: A Social and Economic Study (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, revised edition 1976), 40-111; Newman, Falling from Grace: The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class (New York: Free Press, 1988), 238.

clue in determining whether a Depression-born child from the second subcohort identified with scarcity or with plenty. And those girls and boys born into continuing economic uncertainty between 1936 and 1941--those with unemployed fathers or mothers, those who were hungry--tended to identify with the first subcohort, with its heavy burdens. But other members of the second subcohort identified with the Baby Boomers and with the need for societal change. In fact, in the 1960s, when the nation's culture and politics changed, some of its radical and countercultural leaders came from this group, including Joan Baez (1941), Bob Dylan (1941), and Tom Hayden (1939). And, later, in the 1970s and 1980s, two politicians from this subcohort, Jerry Brown (1938) and Gary Hart (1936) tried politically, but failed, to mobilize the Baby Boom. As Eli Evans (1936), another member of this pivotal subcohort, has observed: "By the 1970s and 1980s, Hart and Brown emerged as the two most successful practitioners of "generational politics. But," befitting this in-between group, "neither was of the generation they were said to lead."[4]

It is evident from the homefront children's letters that the subcohort born between about 1936 and 1941 has been pivotal in defining the entire cohort. "I was a member," a homefront boy wrote, "of the generation that fell between the sharp pincers of

[4] David Shribman, "A Closer Look at the Hart Generation," New York Times Magazine (May 27, 1984); Evans, "A New Generation Takes Over," Newsweek, 104 (July 9, 1984), 13; New York Times, May 17, 1987.

the Depression on one side and World War II on the other." Added another homefront boy, born in 1936: "We had been born in the first flickers of recovery from the Depression: we were symbols of hope for our parents." And he ventured that his birth cohort was "the last ... to grow up and share in a deeply-rooted, purely American sense of security and invincibility," and "the first to have had that security removed at an early age"--on August 6, 1945, by the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. "This loss of innocence was a pivotal psychological event. It separated us not only from the generation that landed on the beaches of Normandy, won World War II and continued to believe in America's superiority and invincibility, but also from the generation that was born following the dawn of the nuclear age."[5]

"I was born September 3, 1939," wrote a homefront girl. "Some date, right?" Germany had just invaded Poland, thus triggering the Second World War. "For me," she continued, "there was always War until I was six years old." This girl was born at the midpoint of the homefront children's cohort. So too was another homefront girl. "Born in 1939," she observed, "I was both a child of the depression and the war. I recall hearing

[5] Arthur Prager, Rascals at Large, or The Clue in the Old Nostalgia (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 8; Evans, "A New Generation Takes Over," 13.

about both almost all my life."[6]

Both during the Second World War and later, a homefront boy born in 1935 wrote, "We were the 'transition' or bridge society." At issue was year of birth juxtaposed with national and international events. Most of all, it was wars that defined this middle group as well as the older and younger ones. Born in 1936, for example, Eli Evans reflected that he was of "the generation too young for World War II and Korea and too old for Vietnam...." "Korea was my adolescence," observed a homefront girl born in 1937; "Vietnam found me in the throes of raising children...." "My brothers and I are separated by a half generation," explained another homefront girl born in 1940. "It's a big half generation.... 'My' war had been fought by a country united ... [theirs] by a country divided." "The fathers of our generation went to WW II," added a homefront girl born in 1936, "our big brothers went to Korea, & our little brothers went to Vietnam." Moreover, she reflected, her subcohort was "caught between the cultural politics of the 50s & 60s." Thus, in vital ways, the second was the "in-between" subcohort; in its way, it was like being the middle child in a family. As Eli Evans has observed of the role played by these transitional Americans, "Perhaps our greatest legacy will be the way we served as

[6] Letters #32, #197, #345, #413; Michael Zuckerman, "Dr. Spock: The Confidence Man," in Charles E. Rosenberg, editor, The Family in History (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 192-96.

interpreters of the rebellious young to our elders. Of neither generation, we had ... been called on to build bridges between the generations on either side of us."7

The third subcohort consists of the "war babies" born between 1942 and 1945. Significantly, it was the upsurge in births during the war years which launched the demographic bulge known as the "Baby Boom." Landon Jones, the writer, has used the analogy of the "'pig in a python' to describe the resulting motion of the baby-boom bulge through the decades as it ages." It was the children born between 1942 and 1945 whose presence first put pressure on government at all levels to build more grade schools, then more high schools, and finally more colleges. And it was this subcohort's members who first began to worry whether Social Security, along with other pension, disability, Medicare, and trust accounts could fund their retirements in twenty to thirty years.8

Perhaps most significantly, from the third subcohort came many tens of thousands of soldiers, sailors, and marines who helped to constitute the first wave of the massive build-up in Vietnam from 1965 to 1968. It is further evidence that war has

[7] Letters #119, #133, #156, #210, #228, #324E; Evans, "A New Generation Takes Over," 13.

[8] Jones, Great Expectations: American and the Baby Boom Generation (New York: Coward. McCann & Geoghegan, 1980), 2; Phillip Longman, "Justice Between Generations," Atlantic Monthly, 255 (June 1985), 73-81.

been an element of monumental significance in the lives of the children born between 1942 and 1945. Because of these children's early developmental stages during the war--because they were neonates up to age three or four--they probably suffered the greatest emotional damage from father separation and absence. And, the sad irony was, it was they who went to Vietnam as twenty- and twenty-one-year olds in 1965. Moreover, for this subcohort, there was the possibility of a three-generational relationship with war. Their grandfathers--born during the 1890s who were children during the Spanish-American War--were of draft age during the First World War. Their fathers, who were born during the First World War, were in their mid-twenties during the Second World War and ripe for conscription in 1943 and 1944. And members of the 1942-1945 subcohort came of draft age during Vietnam. Moreover, in 1990 and 1991, a fourth generation--including sons and daughters of some of the homefront children--went to wage war in the Persian Gulf.

Martin Wangh, a psychoanalyst, has ventured that there is "a psychogenetic factor in the recurrence of war," namely, that every twenty-five years or so, the sons refight their fathers' war. Wangh hypothesized that young men's "predisposition" for war "is the result of the experience of the stresses of a previous war which has traumatized these people so that they unconsciously seek a revival of the traumatic situation, in consonance with the 'repetition compulsion'" described by Sigmund

Freud. The fallacy here is that it is old men, not young men, who declare war and order the country's sons and daughters and grandchildren to do the fighting. On the other hand, this "psychogenetic factor"--when combined, first, with the intensely patriotic popular culture that prevailed from the 1940s well into the 1960s and, second, with the prevalent sex-typing that defined warfare as a rite of passage for young men--does help to explain the ready response of millions of young people to the call to the colors not only during the Second World War, but also during the early stages of the Indochinese War. Ironically, the returning fathers of the Second World War, knowing the horrors of the battlefield, often prayed that there would be no more wars. When a homefront girl's older brother--a medic who had won both the Silver and Bronze Star--returned in 1945, his wife was pregnant with their first child. "I don't want a little boy," he said; "I don't want him to have to serve in a war." But when war broke out in Vietnam, the boy volunteered for the Marines.9

A key issue to the homefront children is that of memory. "My high school class, 1957," wrote a homefront girl born in 1940, "was the last one in which the youngsters could remember the war." A homefront boy born in 1935 agreed that "the age of

[9] Wangh, "A Psychogenetic Factor in the Recurrence of War," International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 49 (Parts 2 & 3, 1968), 319-23; letter #440. I wish to thank Dr. Nanette C. Aurerhahn not only for pointing out this article, but also for familiarizing me with psychoanalytic insights into generations, particularly as evidenced in the trauma and unresolved mourning of children of survivors of the Holocaust.

the war children makes a big difference in what they understood. Those born after 1940 really learned about the war" afterwards, at the movies over the next fifteen years--from the Best Years of Our Lives (1946) and Battleground, Twelve O'Clock High, and The Sands of Iwo Jima, all released in 1949; to Stalag 17 (1953), The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957), and numerous others in this genre. And another homefront boy, born in 1941, said that he and the other children born that year "have the quality of last survivors--like children in a flood.... We were the last, perhaps, to inhabit the same America our schoolbooks taught us about, the last to believe that you had to obey the rules, but that if you obeyed them you could win the game."10

The final issue is the letters themselves and, more particularly, how a historian should assess these documents. Clearly, this is a self-selected survey, the contributors to which doubtless had self-serving reasons for writing. First, I found very few letters which, on the surface, were outrageous. On the other hand, I found several hundred letters which were utterly compelling, written without guile, and in which I could detect no motive to try to deceive me.

10 Letters #97E, #119, #120; Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, "America's Vietnam War Films: Marching Toward Denial," in Dittmar and Michaud, editors, From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 4-6; "Refugio," U.S. News & World Report, 107 (December 18, 1989), 51.

Historians always have to assess their evidence, whether it comes from manuscript collections, governmental achives, newspapers or magazines, censuses, or oral histories. The guide which I have followed in testing the evidence in these letters is the same guide which I have employed in determining the reliability of other evidence. It is a guide, moreover, which has been suggested by Sir Isaiah Berlin, who has written that art should accrue from the study of human life.

In conclusion, then, let me quote from Isaiah Berlin. "History, and other accounts of human life," Berlin has written, "are at times spoken of as being akin to art. What is usually meant is that writing about human life depends to a large extent on descriptive skill, style, lucidity, choice of examples, distribution of emphasis, vividness of characterization, and the like, But," he has added, "there is a profounder sense in which the historian's activity is an artistic one. Historical explanation is to a large degree arrangement of the discovered facts in patterns which satisfy us because they accord with life--the variety of human experience and activity--as we know it and can imagine it."[11]

[11] Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History," in Henry Hardy, editor, Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays by Isaiah Berlin (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 132.